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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4009

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6074

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000014

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/05/2020

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S CULT OF PERSONALITY

REF: A. 09 ASHGABAT 1188

[1](#)B. 09 ASHGABAT 1595

[1](#)C. 09 ASHGABAT 1679

[1](#)D. 09 ASHGABAT 1670

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: President Berdimuhamedov appears to be following his predecessor's example of establishing a cult of personality. This appears to be part of the model of governance that the Turkmen leadership knows and with which it is comfortable. However, so far Berdimuhamedov has set limits on the extent of the cult of personality, choosing, unlike his predecessor, not to have his image on currency or to have erected any statues of himself. Even without the president's image being in a room, his influence is felt, and invoking his name can cause the same reaction as his presence because no one would dare to be caught questioning a presidential decision. It remains to be seen what will happen in subsequent years, since Berdimuhamedov is less than half way through his first presidential term. He may, once he gets even more comfortable in his position, gradually dismantle what remains of his predecessor's cult of personality. END SUMMARY.

BUILDING HIS IMAGE

[12.](#) (C) Turkmenistan President Berdimuhamedov appears to be following in the steps of his predecessor by establishing his own cult of personality, drawing on an example he knows and with which he feels comfortable (Ref A). When Berdimuhamedov first became president, the Democratic Party, which supports the concept of one strong ruler, was assigned the task of building up the new leader. Party activists did this in part by traveling around Turkmenistan and praising the president (Ref B). Berdimuhamedov's omnipresence was also conveyed through the public display of his portrait throughout Ashgabat and the rest of the country. His portrait is on billboards at major street intersections, in conference rooms in government buildings, and in banquet halls at

government-owned restaurants and hotels. On Turkmenistan Airlines flights, Berdimuhamedov's portrait hangs in the front of the cabin. There are even portraits at a local gym of Berdimuhamedov doing karate. In June, Berdimuhamedov presided over the opening of the newly-built central mosque in Mary city, which was named for the president.

13. (C) Berdimuhamedov is also exerting his authority over a wide range of subject matters, showing himself to be the foremost expert on everything from city planning to medicine. He has written books on the Ahal-Teke horses, medicinal plants, and the "Epoch of the New Revival," which is what the state press has named Berdimuhamedov's presidency. The state-run television news shows him almost every day chairing government meetings, where he appears to strictly assess the work of each Deputy Chairman of his Cabinet. He is also frequently shown demonstrating his expertise in riding horses, participating in other sports, and inspecting the wide array of new projects being constructed around the country. News anchors and commentators credit almost every positive development to "our esteemed president." When new South Korean-built buses first appeared on the streets of Ashgabat, they were labeled with the phrase "gift of the respected president." Berdimuhamedov, his accomplishments, and past speeches, are often the central focus of speeches and addresses by Turkmen officials at events, even if the event has little to do with the president.

SHOWING SOME RESTRAINT

14. (C) There are some limits to Berdimuhamedov's self

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promotion. He has not erected statues of himself, as his predecessor Niyazov did, nor has he put his face on any of the new money that was minted in 2009 (Ref C). In most private homes, apartment buildings, and restaurants there are no posters of the president. Conversations with local residents rarely focus on anything related to Berdimuhamedov or his policies, unless it is to complain about the president's traveling causing traffic jams.

POWER BY PROXY

15. (C) The president's picture does not need to be seen everywhere for his presence to be felt ubiquitously. No one wants to be in the position of being seen as challenging the president, so they tend to acquiesce to anything that they are told is a presidential order. For instance, in the week leading up to New Year's, restaurant owners were ordered to close their businesses, reportedly by presidential order. When one restaurant owner questioned the legitimacy of the order and asked to see it in writing, he was harassed by the local police, but never shown a written document, raising questions about whether the order really came from the president (Ref D).

16. (C) In addition, having connections to the president is viewed as a trump card, that can be used to exert power in almost any situation. One Embassy officer was awoken after midnight one night by the building doorman asking him to move his car because he mistakenly parked in the space of someone from "the fifth floor." When the Embassy officer looked confused about the fifth floor reference, he was told that relatives of the president live on the fifth floor. The building doormen usually tell residents that they cannot help if someone is parked in your assigned parking space, but for the president's family they jumped to remedy the situation. Another Embassy officer got into an exchange with a resident of his apartment building about her parking in his assigned space, and she threatened to get him kicked out of the building because she knew the president.

17. (C) COMMENT: Although there are, no doubt, some individuals who have influence with Berdimuhamedov, Turkmenistan's Government is a one-man show and that seems to

be the system most Turkmen expect. Deputy Chairs of the Cabinet of Ministers, presumably the next highest level of officials, act extremely deferentially to the president both in public and in private meetings. And in many ways they act as his staff. The president's influence is felt in all aspects of life from celebrations like weddings and New Year's to everyday activities, such as going to the gym. It seems likely that the cult of personality will continue to spread, because the Turkmen have no other indigenous model for governance. One sign of Berdimuhamedov deliberately trying to bolster his image as the sole source of power would be removing some of the statues of the former President Niyazov. END COMMENT.

CURRAN